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Culture of Migration in the Middle Hills in Nepal

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Migration has historically been a significant feature of livelihoods in the fragile socioeconomic and environmental context of the Himalayan middle hills (Hitchcock 1961; MacFarlane 1976; Whelpton 2005). Hardly any area in the hills of Nepal remains unaffected by the exodus of young men, and increasingly young women, to other parts of the region, across the border to India, and more recently to various global destinations. These migrations have created and sustained trans-regional and trans-national links, connecting distant cultures, countries, and economies.

In villages and towns throughout the middle hills of Nepal, labour migration features as a regular theme of conversation among the people, with a particular focus on aspirations, planning, organisation, benefits, and costs. People often tell visitors that there is no one left in the villages but the old people, women, and little children. While this is certainly not true, the historical practice of out-migration, combined with a high aspiration among the younger generation to leave rural villages in search of employment and associated

The 'culture of migration' affects even those who stay back, often old people, women, and small children

consumption opportunities in cities and towns, often means that even those who stay back are affected by the 'culture of migration' (Cohen 2004). In other words, decisions about migration have become a pervasive part of everyday experience. Households consider migration one of the key strategies for managing their livelihoods in a socioeconomically, environmentally, and politically fragile context.

This paper gives an overview of socio-cultural meanings attached to male labour migration, drawing on my fieldwork in Nepal's western hills (in Palpa district from 2004 to 2010) and far-western hills (in Doti from 2001 to 2008), in which I followed migrants from these areas to Uttaranchal, Delhi and Mumbai in India. It analyses how hill men interpret the migration experience and how their strategic responses to livelihood insecurities are shaped not just by economic calculation but also by a complex set of gendered socio-cultural considerations, particularly relating to ideas of consumption, modernity, and masculinity. The paper argues that migrating is a social requirement for achieving a desired form of manhood – for being a man – among the marginal households in the western hills of Nepal; that migration does not just allow these households to 'save there and eat here' (Watkins 2005), but also involves cultural processes that engage ideas of gender roles and modernity.

Migration is a key strategy for managing livelihoods in a socioeconomically, environmentally, and politically fragile context

Cultural context

As in other parts of the world, the context in which young men in the middle hills struggle to achieve their personal goals is not of their own making, and it has changed over the past decades. Over the years, the incorporation of the middle hills into the market



economy, as indicated by the commodification of land, labour, and money and associated ideas of 'bikas' (development) and modernity, has had important impacts on men's lives.

Subsistence mountain agriculture combined with male labour migration has remained the key livelihood strategy in the middle hills. Migration and associated remittances have sustained hill agriculture for decades. 'An important aspect of the relationship between India and Central Nepal is the close connection arising from the stringencies of hill agriculture on the one hand and the cash value of Indian employment on the other' (Hitchcock 1961: 15).

However, farming is no longer an aspiration among the young men in rural Nepal, not only because it is not profitable but more importantly because farming is seen as a traditional occupation. As a consequence, young migrants, unlike the previous generation, see the value of migration and associated remittances no longer as a means of supporting subsistence hill agriculture, but rather as a means of moving away from it (although it is possible to spot a few young men attempting cash crops or small-scale livestock enterprises). This shift can be explained by looking at the effect of development discourse on men growing up in the middle hills. This discourse has encouraged a view of rural villages as traditional places to be left in the past and of urban areas as modern places to be desired (Pigg 1992), influencing the meaning of agrarian livelihoods and out-migration to cities and towns. Thus movement of people out of agriculture signifies not only physical movement, but movement in the ideological space of development and modernity.

Young men in Nepal no longer aspire to farming as an occupation, partly because it is unprofitable, but especially because it is seen as traditional



Migration to cities in search of education or salaried work is seen by young men as a route to individual and social transformation

In the context of development discourse that has created rural and urban areas as differentiated social categories, the significance of migration lies in the opportunities it offers to the individual men who migrate and to their households, and also in its relation to the experience of other men in the community (Pigg 1992).

Migration and male success

Commonly known as 'lāhur jāne', migration of male family members to join the British and Indian armies has long been a practice among the hill ethnic groups such as the Magars and Gurungs in the west. The ability to join a foreign army has long been a measure of a man's success among certain hill ethnic groups. In recent years, the number of men going to work in foreign armies has decreased owing to increased competition in recruitment, greater emphasis on the importance of education for social mobility, and growing aspiration for salaried employment ('jāgir') within and outside Nepal.

In the past two to three decades, one of the ways through which young men have attempted to improve their lives is through schooling; enthusiasm for formal education has increased dramatically among young men and women across different caste and ethnic backgrounds. Migration to Kathmandu and other major cities in Nepal in search of education or salaried employment is a possibility for youth from high-caste and well-off households that have access to finances and social networks to facilitate study and/or job seeking in the cities. Those from poorer and marginalised groups with few social networks and little cultural capital find it difficult to turn their aspirations into reality. Although





Young migrant working in a brick factory in Kathmandu – hoping to participate in the otherwise inaccessible world of consumption and modernity

education is increasingly seen by young men as a route to individual and social transformation and employment, political agency, and dignity, not all young men can afford to go to school, nor can most men with some educational credentials turn their education into secure employment. Only a few young men with access to finances, social networks, political patronage, and cultural capital manage to continue education and find salaried employment.

India as the main destination

Of late, the Gulf and Malaysia have emerged as desired destinations of migration among hill men with some educational credentials but no employment prospects within Nepal. However, organising migration to these destinations requires a high level of investment (brokering fees and air travel) and social networks; this aspiration is within reach only for households that can manage to earn or borrow the large sum (around US\$ 1,000) needed to finance it.

Migration to work in Indian cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Punjab) has always been a popular practice among men in these hill villages and remains pervasive among the poorer households in the region. Going to India to do manual labour is more common, although less desired, than going to the Gulf or Malaysia or finding employment within Nepal. People often refer to work in India as 'phāltu kām' (useless work or work that does not earn much respect or money) or 'sāno tino kām' (menial work or work that has low status or value). Nevertheless, men generally prefer to go to India in search of work rather than to stay in the village to manage their farms and/or work on others' land; going to work in India provides an escape from traditional

categories of 'halo jotne' (ploughing the field) or 'bhāri bokne' (carrying weight). If such migrants are lucky they may find contractual employment with a regular salary and some level of job security in an Indian city.

Conclusion

Life in the hills of Nepal severely constrains the ability of many young men to achieve their ideal model of masculinity. They neither wish to work in agriculture and be seen as 'halo jotne' or 'bhāri bokne', nor do they want to go to India to work as menial labourers. They cannot easily find salaried work or afford to migrate to the Gulf or Malaysia. Those who are unable to migrate and/or get salaried employment risk being labelled idle or 'phāltu', a category that young men are desperate to avoid.

Migration offers young men an opportunity not only to earn money to look after their families, but also to participate in the world of consumption and modernity that is otherwise not accessible to them. The choices they make are shaped not only by the socioeconomic and environmental fragility in the middle hills, but also by the cultural resources that are available to them. It appears that the ideas and experiences associated with migration and modernity and their role in reconstructing gender identities help to sustain conditions that encourage a steady flow of hill men to work in Indian cities.

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